OPINION

BY NIAZ MURTAZA

Weak state pillars

OUR state is a delicate structure consisting of diverse ethnicities and provinces that preceded its creation. They elected to join, in fact create, Pakistan in 1947. A reflection, though under different circumstances, can be found in the 13 colonies, that having gained independence, united under the American constitution in the late 18th century. Accepting the primacy of states, the US constitution gives the centre limited powers. The 1940 Lahore Resolution, too, promised democratic devolution, regardless of its legal shape (which it didn't define), with matters of autonomy left for later. But this promise wasn't kept despite our need for it.

New countries thrive on the strength of four foundational traits: statehood, nationhood, polity and economy. Pakistan differed from the nearly 100 decolonised states, being among the nine decolonised entities that split from other decolonised ones. Six split after decolonisation (Timor-Leste, Singapore, Bangladesh, Namibia, Eritrea and South Sudan) given ethnic/racial tensions, mostly through conflict. Three (Pakistan, Lebanon and Israel) were split by the colonisers at the time of decolonisation along religious lines. Violence followed. All decolonised states had weak economies thanks to the effects of the colonial era; but most had existed earlier as distinct colonised states or at least united sub-units of the latter; many were ethnically homogenous and some had strong polities due to mass freedom drives.

We were among the handful of states that were arguably deficient vis- -vis all four traits. We didn't exist even as a united sub-unit earlier; we were ethnically diverse with one large dominant group, and had for the most part an elitist, rootless freedom leadership. Moreover, both our wings were, before Partition, among India's poorest and most unequal regions. So, our most endemic problems arose from prenatal gaps and imposed a paradoxical reality: devolved democracy was imperative for us but also very hard to graft. Non-elected and non-civilian forces can easily overwhelm political forces but their hold further weakens all four traits, making democracy more critical.

We have oscillated between taking minor steps towards the imperative and being pulled back into its autocratic embrace by the inevitable. The era of four military dictators and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule among civilians, covering half our existence, were the defining points of a centralised autocracy. Each era undercut societal pillars, such as media and civil society, and state pillars, including parliament and the judiciary and even the executive vis- -vis the establishment. The outcomes were societal tensions, violence, stagnation, separatism and extremism. These eras also sapped trust, creativity, energy, freedom, tolerance, reason and vitality.

We are now into our second overtly civilian and sixth overall era of dominant autocracy, with our pillars already too fractured to take more stress. Yet, autocratic forces are further weakening the pillars of state and society, ignoring lessons from past tragedies.

The current hybrid set-up poses two key problems. Firstly, its policies are undermining economic, external and security capacities. Secondly, it is eroding political institutions and processes — electoral, legislative, judicial, accountability and oppositional — that could otherwise have given timely feedback and applied checks on the rulers. The media has been silenced and civil society crushed. With a free hand, our inept rulers are simply pushing the state towards further crises.

> Devolved democracy was imperative but also very hard to graft.

The results are apparent. The sense of misplaced stability created by the regime since the May conflict has been overtaken by the crisis engendered by the TLP and Afghan issues as well as the Islamabad suicide attack and a damning IMF governance report. Further crises down the road mixed with lack of progress can convert it into the sorry spectacle that all our unelected or controversially elected regimes become.

In 1947, we started with major gaps in statehood, nationhood, economy and polity. Seventy-eight years later, those gaps are still large.

The state and economy have expanded but mainly serve the elites, while nationhood gaps are arguably growing and the polity remains elitist, inept and unaccountable. Meanwhile, demographic, ecological, external, social and economic threats look set to rise over the next 25 years. If the political arena remains unelected and inept, the threats may push us fast towards a point of no return. ■

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BY VAN NGUYEN

Patterns of silence

SEVENTEEN-year-old Sana Yousaf never imagined that the harmless videos she posted online would one day become evidence in the investigation of her own murder. What began as routine trolling escalated into threats that followed her off the screen and into her real life. Her story shocked the country not because it was rare, but because it reflects an increasingly common reality.

Every year, the 16 Days of Activism remind us that gender-based violence recognises no borders. It is an epidemic that seeps into households, workplaces, and digital spaces, silencing women who are told to endure rather than speak. As a Vietnamese woman working in Pakistan, I have come to see how our different history and culture can produce similar patterns of silence. Geography changes; the barriers do not.

In 2024, the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency received 135,000 complaints, yet only 826 reached prosecutions. A success rate of 0.6 per cent tells us everything we need to know: survivors are navigating a system not built for them. Many must travel long distances to one of only 15 cybercrime police stations, often borrowing devices from male relatives to file a complaint. The process is so difficult that many give up long before they begin.

Pakistan has made meaningful efforts. Legislation exists, crisis centres are operational, and helplines are expanding. But these protections remain fragmented and inconsistently implemented. A predictable result: underreporting continues, accountability remains rare, and cycles of violence endure.

Last year, public conversations on digital violence made one thing crystal clear: Pakistan's systems were built for an offline era. They are not equipped to respond when harm spreads instantaneously, anonymously, and permanently.

With UNDP's support, the Ministry of Human Rights developed Pakistan's first national strategy to address Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV). Co-created with survivors, legislators, and digital rights experts, it anchors accountability where it belongs. A central reform is the introduction of a 24-hour takedown requirement, overseen by a new Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority. With Meta responding to 75pc of law-enforcement requests, TikTok 16pc, and X none at all, voluntary cooperation is no longer enough.

The strategy also recognises that harm is shaped by context. The 2012 Kohistan case, where a video of veiled women clapping led to murders, exposed the disconnect between global moderation standards and local realities.

These failures have consequences. Women censor themselves or vanish from online spaces. Digital abuse limits mobility, expression, and economic opportunity. Visibility becomes a risk, not a right.

Growing up in Vietnam, I saw how violence was dismissed as a 'private matter', something best handled behind closed doors. That silence is not unique to my country. In Pakistan, the stories differ, but the enabling structures — stigma and normalisation of harm — remain painfully familiar.

The strategy aims to break this pattern through four pillars: prevention, protection, accountability and survivor support. One critical reform closes the 'blackmail loophole', recognising that the threat to leak intimate images is itself an act of violence. The strategy also confronts the rise of AI-generated sexual imagery. With 95pc of deepfake content targeting women, stronger forensic capability and platform regulation are a must.

Pakistan's digital transformation is accelerating. Eight million women came online in 2024, yet their participation remains fragile. Without structural protection, digital inclusion becomes conditional on a woman's capacity to endure abuse.

> The 16 Days of Activism remind us that GBV recognises no borders.

By introducing this strategy, Pakistan positions itself among the first in South Asia to present a coordinated, forward-looking response to online gender-based violence — shifting from documenting harm to preventing it.

But laws alone will not end this. Whether progress holds depends on what each of us — platforms, policymakers, families, and citizens — chooses to do next. Women are not asking for perfection; only protection, dignity, and the freedom to participate without fear.

I am often asked what drives me to this work.

My motivation is deeply personal. Every woman I know — friends, colleagues, family — has either survived violence or knows someone who has. I am no exception. This universality is what makes the issue impossible to ignore. When you realise that half of humanity bears the burden of fear, you understand that the fight is not a women's issue — it is a societal one.

The screens are not going away. The violence should. ■

The writer is deputy resident representative, UNDP Pakistan.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Pak-Turkey communique

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and Turkey today [Nov 24] reaffirmed that the question of Kashmir should be settled in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions regarding the right of self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, a joint communique issued at the conclusion of the State visit … of Turkish President Koruturk said. The communique expressed deep satisfaction of the two sides at the harmonious development of their already close bilateral relations, as well as their collaboration in CENTO and RCD… . The Prime Minister of Pakistan reaffirmed full support … to the just cause of the Turkish Cypriots and the Cyprus policy of Turkey. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from London,] Major-General Ziaur Rahman has said external elements are conspiring to destroy the country's independence and sovereignty.… In a nationwide broadcast … Gen. Rahman, who is Army Chief of Staff and Deputy Martial Law Administrator, reaffirmed the non-party and non-political character of the Government and emphasised that its aim was to steer Bangladesh through free and fair elections.… . Gen. Rahman said more political prisoners would be released shortly.

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Cotton export duty

KARACHI: The Pakistan Government have raised export duty on raw cotton from Rs 180 to Rs 300 per bale of 400 pounds with immediate effect, according to a Gazette Extraordinary issued yesterday [Nov 24]. … An announcement to this effect was made by the Commerce Minister, Mr Fazlur Rahman, during the second reading of the Bill designed to further amend the Tariff Act with a view to enhancing the export duty on cotton.

A full-dress debate ensued in which the Government came under heavy fire from Opposition members as well as League backbenchers. The first shot was fired by Mr Sukhdev, who appeared to be shocked by the announcement. Chaudhri Ali Akbar of the Punjab, Mr Khuhro and Mr Jaffer of Sind took up cudgels on behalf of the cotton growers, maintaining that the agriculturist would be adversely affected by the increased rates of duty.

While one member argued that this "rash" step would leave Pakistan faced with about 8,00,000 bales of cotton unlifted, another thought that it would result in a sharp slump in prices, causing hardship and misery to the grower, who would get very low returns for his cotton. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Mental health issue must be addressed

PAKISTAN faces an alarming mental health crises, with fewer than 500 psychiatrists and over 90 per cent of people suffering from depression or anxiety simply going untreated. Despite growing awareness, mental health remains a taboo, overshadowed by cultural stigma, religious misconceptions and economic hardship. In many communities, psychological disorders are still viewed as signs of spiritual weakness, divine punishment or even supernatural possession, pushing people to seek help from faith-healers rather than professionals.

Deep-rooted phrases, like "men do not cry", discourage emotional expression, while words, like *pagal* or *nafsiyati*, are used as insults, silencing those who suffer. Mental healthcare is seen as a luxury only the wealthy can afford, as therapy costs thousands of rupees, and facilities are largely concentrated in major cities. The economic instability, inflation and trauma caused by floods earlier this year have only deepened despair and anxiety among the masses, making mental health a national emergency hidden beneath denial.

Beyond these structural problems lies Pakistan's long-standing battle with fear and silence. Topics such as divorce, domestic abuse, or trauma remain heavily stigmatised, trapping countless individuals, especially women and girls, in emotionally damaging situations due to the fear of judgment or financial dependence. Men, too, are victims of toxic expectations, as they are taught to suppress emotions and to equate vulnerability with weakness. This suppression often manifests in aggression, substance abuse or even suicide.

The problem starts early as most schools lack trained counsellors, and children are told to just stop crying, or be strong as if expressing pain is shameful. Marital abuse, too, is dismissed as a personal issue, and victims are generally urged to compromise even at the cost of their mental wellbeing. As a result, issues like depression and anxiety fester in silence.

Just as Pakistan fought the recent Covid pandemic through consistent mass-level awareness, we can adopt the very same approach to confront mental health stigma. Consistent dialogue through the media, entertainment and education sectors can normalise conversations about mental health. Schools should integrate emotional literacy and coping strategies into their curriculum. Organisations spreading awareness and providing tele-therapy to underserved areas need to be supported to improve outreach to rural and underprivileged communities.

If policymakers, educators and civil society collectively function to replace judgment with empathy, denial with understanding, and silence with open dialogue, Pakistan can begin a healing process with respect to the invisible wounds. We are at the crossroads between silence and understanding, between denial and healing. The battle against mental health stigma is not just about doctors or hospitals; it is about rewriting our story, replacing the whisper of shame with the voice of empathy, and realising that acknowledging pain is not weakness.

The day we start treating a wounded mind with the same urgency as a wounded body, we will begin our journey on the path to real progress. Healing a nation begins with healing its people, and that starts when we dare to talk, to listen, and to understand that mental health is not a taboo, but a truth that deserves to be heard.

Suman Noor Abbasi
Sukkur

Good old ways

IT seems we are living in a world where people believe they know everything because of the abundance of information — information, not knowledge, mind you — that is scattered across the internet, especially since the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI). Reality, however, is quite the opposite. Information, along with contextual knowledge, was abundant long before the internet in the shape of books, magazines and newspapers. But why did everyone not simply pick up a book or a magazine to stay up to speed? The reason is simple; people are complacent.

Books demand time, focus, comprehension and a genuine hunger for knowledge. Most people were not inclined to take that route. Instead, they relied more on rumours, conspiracy theories or individual stories rather than trying to understand the underlying concepts or themes. That is why storytellers have always been popular. Now, the effort to know is shrinking further. People watch images they want to watch, and passively listen to a select few voices. This phenomenon is hurting their IQ immensely.

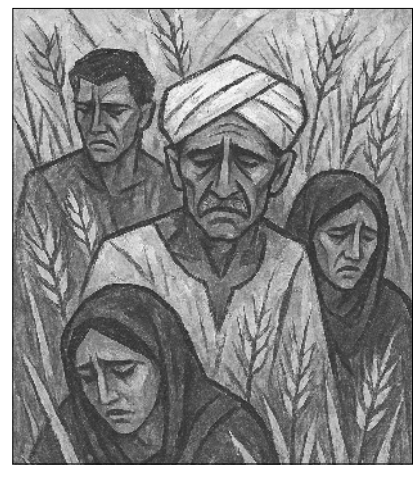
For even the simplest of tasks, instead of taking the harder route, they ask AI a question, receive a fully baked answer, and think they have mastered the subject. But what they miss is the process — the quest for knowledge which once required exploring multiple sources, reading deeply and taking different avenues before reaching the objective. That path itself offered more learning and maturity.

Take GPS as an example. Before its invention, people had to rely on memory to navigate, keeping track of every highway, turn and street number. Now, they just enter the address, and the machine leads them to their destination. But in this process, their brain is left unused. Those precious neurons remain untouched, and another chance to sharpen the mind gets wasted.

The same applies to nearly every aspect of life. We are outsourcing our thinking and abandoning opportunities for mental training. As a result, fewer sharp minds remain. While modern technology and AI provide unmatched convenience, they also dull the mind over time. So, once in a while, there is no harm giving the old ways a try. And, yes, still read books to your children.

Bahadar Ali Khan
Toronto, Canada

Miserable farmers



IT is rather sad that farmers in Pakistan no longer have hopes of government intervention in their favour. This is so because the government has destroyed the agriculture sector, especially wheat production, due to its flawed policies related to price cap and procurement.

It is the season to sow wheat for the next crop, but farmers are reluctant because of the prevailing uncertainty regarding prices. All the hopes of farmers were shattered when the government refused to announce a support price and abandoned procurement. Although this might have been a good step in principle, the way and framework through which it was executed resulted in disasters for the farmers.

There should have been precautionary measures, such as credit schemes and insurance, but, instead, clusters of middlemen exploited the situation and made profit as food hoarders. Those who had stored wheat for the next season faced disappointment when their stocks lost value. The farmers who relied on wheat storage for future income lost faith in the system as the authorities failed to regulate the market forces, or hold the middlemen accountable.

Moreover, many farmers who had started shifting towards other crops are now facing deep uncertainty. They often depend on loans to meet daily needs and occasional expenses, leaving little room to save for the next cultivation season. In reality, the situation reflects the exploitation of farmers in the profit chain. They are the least benefited participants and hardly see any share in profits. These poor souls spend their days and nights working tirelessly in the fields. When such an innocent and silent section of society is compelled to raise its voice, it signals the seriousness of the crisis.

A person working miserably under harsh climatic conditions and unstable market rates — the farmer — can barely survive. It is necessary to devise a permanent and practical plan — a well-thought-out annual framework for crops — to ensure that farmers receive fair compensation and security for all their hard work.

Chaudhary Aamir Sohail
Sargodha

Dengue on the rise

DENGUE, a mosquito-borne viral infection transmitted by the aegypti mosquito, is a recurring health concern in the country, particularly in the post-monsoon season when stagnant water and poor sanitation accelerate its spread. The illness causes high fever, and, in severe cases, can lead to life-threatening complications. More than 8,000 dengue cases have been reported in Sindh in the last few weeks, raising the total number of infections this year close to the 14,000 mark. According to official tally, 27 people, including children, have died of capillary leak syndrome, a hallmark of severe dengue.

The alarming surge in dengue cases in a short span of time in Sindh has no doubt become a cause of grave concern for the people. The growing numbers expose the sorry state of affairs of healthcare system and municipal services in Sindh. Precautionary measures are badly needed to be taken to control any further spread of the disease.

The root cause behind the surge in dengue cases can be eliminated by taking concrete measures so that more people may not fall prey to the disease. It is the responsibility of the government to take all possible effective vector-control measures so that it may not spread any further. The government must play its part fully.

Azhar Azad Mughal
Shikarpur

▶ **PROTECTING LABOURERS:** The Constitution obligates the state to ensure humane and safe working conditions for all. Yet, in reality, countless labourers toil in hazardous and unsafe environments every day. They face frequent injuries, including lifelong disabilities. The state must establish a robust insurance mechanism to protect workers and their families from the devastating consequences of occupational hazards. It is the government's moral and constitutional responsibility to deliver justice and dignity to those whose sweat keeps our economy alive.
Muhammed Sohaib
Mardan

▶ **WORRIED CHILDREN:** The cost of everything is going up. I often hear my parents talk about rising prices. We often used to have pizza nights at home, but now we have to save up for it. I have noticed that my favourite snacks in the store are much more expensive these days. My parents are working just as hard, but their money is not stretching as far. They sometimes have to say 'no' to several things. I hope the decision-makers realise that exorbitant prices do not just affect big businesses; they affect every single person, including children who depend on their families.
Aasim Ali
Rawalpindi

▶ **CLIMATE THREAT:** Climate change is no longer a distant threat; it is a reality affecting communities worldwide. From record-breaking heatwaves to destructive floods and wildfires, the evidence is undeniable. Scientists had been warning us for decades, but meaningful action remained slow and patchy. We need our leaders to prioritise renewable energy, impose stricter regulations, and opt for sustainable development. But this is no more just a government issue because it has now become a collective responsibility. Each of us can make changes: reducing waste, conserving energy, using public transportation, and supporting companies that commit to sustainability. If we act decisively now, we can protect future generations and preserve the only planet that we have.
Nazia Hassan
Rawalpindi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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